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ABSTRACT

A pilot project aimed at providing extension training to early childhood educators was initiated in 1985 by Holland College (HC). Thirty students who were employed in the field of early childhood education on Prince Edward Island, were recruited. Eight evening courses were provided in three counties over a 21-month period. Training focused on child development, programming, and interpersonal communication. Questionnaires were administered to the participants and their supervisors/colleagues to determine the extent to which the participants' professional skills were enhanced through the utilization of this training model. Study findings, based on responses by 26 program participants and 10 of their supervisors or colleagues, included the following: (1) participants felt that the program was effective in enhancing their professional growth through the acquisition and application of new skills; (2) the early childhood education extension model was satisfactory in meeting the participants' needs; (3) 73% felt that the courses on child development, creating a learning environment, counseling techniques, and communicating effectively were the most informative, interesting, and applicable; (4) 46% felt that some of the courses attempted to cover too much in the allotted 12 weeks, but over half of the respondents were generally satisfied with the subjects covered in these courses; and (5) when asked to comment on their employees'/co-workers' skills and confidence levels, all 10 supervisors/colleagues perceived a gain in confidence since the beginning of program, and seven indicated that their employee/colleague was better at communicating ideas with co-workers. Both questionnaires are attached. (JMC)

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AN EFFECTIVE EXTENSION MODEL FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract

A pilot project aimed at providing extension training to Early Childhood Educators was initiated in September of 1985. Thirty (30) students, who were employed in the field of Early Childhood Education on Prince Edward Island, were recruited. The training was provided in the form of eight (8) evening courses, in three (3) different counties, over a twenty-one (21) month period. Emphasis was placed on the areas of Child Development, Programming and Interpersonal Communication. Questionnaires administered to participants, their supervisors and colleagues indicate that the participant's professional skills were enhanced through the utilization of this training model. Some insights are offered into regarding the utilization of this model.

AN EFFECTIVE EXTENSION MODEL FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The increased number of women in the work force has escalated the demand for child care across Canada. It was estimated that 22,000 women were in the work force during 1985 across Prince Edward Island [1]. The preschool population (birth to six years) is estimated at 12,000 for 1986 [2]. These statistics attest to the urgent need for adequate child care facilities. In addition, in Prince Edward Island, kindergartens fall under the jurisdiction of the Department of Health and Social Services, since they are not part of the public school system they are licensed as early childhood centres. Presently, there are 3,000 licensed spaces across the province and approximately 300 early childhood professionals are responsible for the care of preschoolers in licensed centres.

In January of 1986, the provincial government introduced legislation requiring the supervisor and one staff person at each licensed early childhood facilities to be certified by 1991. Failure to obtain the necessary basic training could endanger job security.

In 1985 [3] a study was commissioned by the Early Childhood Education Program of Holland College, P.E.I., under a Canada

1. Department of Labor, Prince Edward Island
2. Department of Health and Social Services, Prince Edward Island
3. An Early Childhood Education Extension Model for Prince Edward Island, 1984

Works Project. Its purpose was to explore existing extension program models across Canada and then design a suitable one for P.E.I., taking into consideration the needs of the participants and the rural nature of the province.

An extension model was designed based on the findings of this study. It was decided that due to the low wages of early childhood workers, training would need to be made available free of charge. Thus, funding was secured through the Canada Employment and Immigration Centre. The training was provided during the evenings to enable the participants to remain employed. As well, participants were permitted to use their place of work for the practicum component and courses were offered in their own community.

It was hypotherized that the Early Childhood Education Extension model would enhance the participants' professional skills and meet their needs as adult learners presently employed in Early Childhood Education.

METHODS

Thirty individuals, who were employed in the field of education, were recruited across Prince Edward Island. A co-ordinator was hired to offer eight (8) evening courses in each of the three (3) counties of Prince Edward Island over a 21 month period. The classes were three (3) hours long and were held from

Monday through Thursday on a rotating schedule. Emphasis was placed on the areas of Child Development, Programming, Interpersonal Communication, Professionalism, Learning Environments, Counselling, Administration and the Special Needs of Children.

One questionnaire was completed by the participants, another by supervisors/colleagues of the participants. The questionnaires focused on the key areas of the Extension Model. Please refer to Appendix 1 for the two (2) questionnaires.

Fifteen questions comprised the questionnaire administered to the participants in July, 1987. Twenty-six (26) participants responded.

Two-thirds (2/3) of the 30 participants were self-employed and had no supervisor at their centres. The second questionnaire was sent to ten (10) supervisors/colleagues to determine the effectiveness of the training at the participants place of work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The responses given in both questionnaires indicate that the program was effective in enhancing the participants professional growth through the acquisition and application of new skills. Overall responses also indicate that the Early Childhood Education Extension Model was satisfactory in meeting the participants needs.

In order to improve future programs, it was necessary to determine which courses the students found to be most useful. Seventy-three (73) percent of the participants surveyed felt that Child Development, Creating a Learning Environment, Counselling Techniques, and Communicating Effectively, were the four courses found to be the most informative, interesting and applicable. All four of these courses had a higher rate of student participation and the theory was perhaps easier to apply at the participants Early Childhood facility.

Sixty-two (62) percent of the students surveyed found the Basic Programming course to be useful, although some students expressed dissatisfaction with its format. Fifty-four (54) percent found Advanced Programming to be valuable, fifty (50) percent felt that Administration of Programs for Young Children was effective, and forty-two (42) percent of the students surveyed

felt that the course Fundamentals of Early Childhood Education was informative, interesting, and applicable.

The last three courses were theory oriented and, therefore, were more teacher directed. Also, they tended to cover a lot of theoretical material in a short period of time.

In response to the second question, forty-six (46) percent of the participants surveyed felt that some of the courses attempted to cover too much in the allotted 12 weeks. Eight (8) percent felt that the courses covered too little and the remaining forty-six (46) percent indicated that the courses covered just enough. These answers can be utilized to modify the amount of material covered in a particular course.

The third question addressed the issues of Content and Evaluation. When participants were asked whether they would suggest modification to the content of the short courses, twenty-seven (27) percent of them felt that they would suggest modifications to some of the short courses. Fifty-four (54) percent of the participants surveyed indicated that the content required no modification. Nineteen (19) percent did not respond to this question. These results indicate that over half of the respondents were generally satisfied with the subjects covered in the short courses.

Since the oral evaluation system utilized at Holland College was new for all the participants, it was necessary to determine whether it was found to be satisfactory. Fifty-eight (58) percent of the students surveyed were satisfied with the method of evaluation. Thirty-five (35) were dissatisfied and seven (7) percent did not respond.

The oral evaluation system allows the student to be active in determining his/her own skill level. Prior to the beginning of the program, many participants had expressed concerns with the evaluation method. Some felt that the traditional grading system which allowed the instructor to evaluate the students' performance based on tests was preferable. As the results indicate at the conclusion of the program, only a little over half of the students felt that oral evaluation was satisfactory.

These Extension students worked in their field during the day. It was important to present them with a program that allowed for practical application of the theory. Hence question four was designed to determine whether the participants felt that the program offered a good balance of theory and practical application. All of the participants felt that the program offered a good balance of theory and practical application.

All of the participants enrolled in the program were adults who were employed in Early Childhood facilities for at least one year and some many more. In order to ensure that the participants would be active in their own learning, it was necessary to draw on their past and present experiences. Thus, questions 5 and 9 were designed specifically to address the issues of active learning. Eighty-one (81) percent of the participants surveyed, indicated that their knowledge and expertise were sufficiently tapped during the short courses. All of the participants surveyed felt that they were encouraged to participate during class discussions. The response for these two questions indicates that the participants were active in their learning.

When participants were asked "What appealed to your most about this program?", fifty (50) percent indicated that meeting others in their field and having the opportunity to share ideas was appealing. Thirty-five (35) percent indicated that gaining new knowledge about children and early childhood facilities as well as being active participants in their own learning, was what appealed to them. The remaining fifteen (15) percent cited the fact that having the course during the evening was appealing as it allowed them to keep their jobs during the day.

When participants were asked what they disliked most about the program, thirty-five (35) percent indicated that they disliked having to role-play; nineteen (19) percent did not like having to do class presentations; nineteen (19) percent disliked having homework; and the remaining twenty-seven (27) percent cited various things like memorizing theory and being involved in oral evaluations.

All of the participants surveyed felt that the program had been effective in meeting their needs. The most often stated reason was that by completing the program they could obtain certification and, therefore, be able to stay in the field of Early Childhood Education.

In response to question 8, all of the students surveyed stated that they would recommend this program to others. In response to the question "Why?", the answer given most frequently was that people in the field of Early Childhood Education need to be more informed about what is involved in their profession.

It was difficult to tabulate the answers to the question "What new ideas or techniques are you taking back to your kindergarten or day care centre?" Each answer seems to be unique. In general, the replies varied from
"Lots" to "Art and snack ideas", "Rearranging the physical

environment to make optimal use of space", "Putting together a whole new program", "Behaviour Management Techniques", and "Allowing for individuality and creativity with each child."

These answers indicate that each participant had acquired some new ideas and techniques through the program. Furthermore, the subjective answers indicate that skill acquisition is as individual as the participant. Each person was exposed to the same theory, however, the answers indicate that the theory was interpreted to suit individual needs.

In response to question 12, all of the participants indicated that the program had made a contribution in increasing their self-confidence and personal development. This finding was reinforced by their supervisors/colleagues comments.

Participants were asked "What specific changes have you made in your centre or program because of the ideas acquired during the Extension Program?". The changes made fell under three categories: changes to the physical environments, changes to the program, and changes in their approach. Again, the answers varied. Some felt that they were better organized now; better at introducing new materials; able to create and use more home-made materials; increased their sensitivity to the need for less

structure and more free-play activities; recognized the need to create permanent learning centres; do more observations on children; and increase involvement by parents. These varied responses indicate that the program was effective in meeting individual needs.

Seventy (70) percent of the participants surveyed felt that their perception of how children learn has been effected through the extension program. Some of these participants indicated that the two factors that were new to them were: 1) that a child learns through play, and 2) that each child develops and learns at an individual rate. The remaining thirty (30) percent of the participants surveyed felt that their perception of how children learn did not change.

Participants were asked to list three important things that they had learned about themselves through this program. The number one response as indicated by ninety (90) percent of the participants was increased self-confidence and the ability to project it during class presentations, parent-teacher meetings, and daily interactions with children and co-workers. Some of the comments that reinforced this finding includeed, "I'm likable", "I'm capable", and "I'm intelligent." Approximately forty (40) percent of the participants indicated that improved communication

skills, particularly listening skills, was the second most important thing that they had learned about themselves. The third thing was that they had a better understanding of the field of Early Childhood Education, and that this would enable them to design better programs to meet the needs of the children.

These findings suggest that the Early Childhood Education Extension program was effective in augmenting the students personal and professional growth through the acquisition and application of new skills.

SUPERVISOR/COLLEAGUE QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS:

The results of the ten questionnaires submitted to the supervisors/colleagues are as follows. When asked to comment on their employees/co-workers level of confidence, all ten respondents indicated that their employee/co-worker had become more confident since beginning the Extension program. This increased confidence was displayed in the employees interaction with parents, children and co-workers.

Some of the changes noted in the participants work with children included increased warmth, understanding, and a more positive interaction with children.

Thirty (30) percent of the supervisors/co-workers felt that there was no change in the participants relationship with their co-workers. The remaining seventy (70) percent of the respondents indicated that the employee/colleague was better at communicating ideas with co-workers.

In listing changes in the area of "skills displayed," since beginning the Extension program, the responses varied from "increased creativity in art and circle ideas", and "improved communication skills", to "improved program planning."

CONCLUSION

The results of both questionnaires as well as observations made by the co-ordinator and verbal feedback indicate that the extension program was perceived to be successful by all of the participants. Although not all participants expressed satisfaction with every facet of the program, the general consensus was that they would recommend this type of program to their professional peers.

By completing this program, the participants were able to obtain certification and hence remain employed in the field of Early Childhood Education. This factor may have contributed to their overall perception of the Extension program.

Although Prince Edward Island is not large in area, there is significant distance between Early Childhood facilities. For some of the participants, the Extension program provided the only opportunity to get acquainted with their professional peers. Physical isolation and lack of interaction with others leaves many day care and kindergarten teachers feeling isolated.

The Early Childhood Education Extension model was instrumental in reducing this sense of isolation. The program allowed participants from the same county to share solutions and ideas to common problems and thus feel a sense of belonging to a profession. Also, this exchange of information made these adult learners aware of the wealth of knowledge that they already possessed. A confirmation of their techniques by fellow workers was a boost to their self-confidence.

Early Childhood Educators are not perceived to be "professionals" in our society. This is clearly reinforced by their low wages and lack of recognition for the work that they do. Societal perceptions in part are formed by the workers' own perceptions of their work. Before attempting to change societal attitudes regarding early education, it is important to instill the early childhood educators with a positive attitude. To reach this objective, opportunities for skill development and personal growth were made an integral part of the Extension program.

Results from both questionnaires indicate that the participants personal and professional skills were augmented through the Extension program. Observations made by the co-ordinator at the participants place of work, and oral evaluations, further indicate that the participants had indeed acquired new skills and, furthermore, were actively applying them in their daily interactions.

It would have been desirable to conduct a pre-test in the form of a skills assessment questionnaire for participants at the start of the program. A follow-up study in a year's time could also help to determine whether the skills obtained by the participants during the program are still being displayed.

The success of any extension program largely depends upon the motivation of the adult learner, the student/teacher interaction, the flexibility of the schedule, and the program location.

The Early Childhood Education Extension model was successful because it met the needs of the participants. It was made affordable through government grants for tuition, books, travel, and babysitting. The program was made accessible by changing locations to be near the participants. Scheduling the classes in

the evening enabled the participants to remain employed. The subject areas covered in the short courses were relevant to the field of Early Childhood Education. The participants were initially motivated to enroll in the program to obtain certification, however, if the program had failed to meet their needs, some of them could have sought alternatives.

In conclusion, this model was successful, in meeting the needs of the participants. Based on the success of this pilot project, the government has agreed to fund a similar program for 1988. This model's effectiveness lies in its flexibility and ability to provide distance education by moving the program instead of the learner.

1987 11 28
C. MacLean

Footnotes

1. Department of Labour, Prince Edward Island

2. Department of Health and Social Services, Prince Edward Island

3. An Early Childhood Education Extension Model for Princ Edward Island, 1984.

A P P E N D I X 1

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION EXTENSION PROGRAM
STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

1. Eight short courses were offered during this program. Please check off the course(s) which you found the most informative, interesting, and applicable.

___ Child Development

___ Creating a Learning Environment

___ Fundamentals of Early Childhood Education

___ Counselling Techniques

___ Communicating Effectively

___ Basic Programming

___ Advanced Programming

___ Administration of Programs for Young Children

2. Do you feel each of the courses attempted to cover too much, too little, or just enough? Please be specific.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

3. This is a two part question. Please answer each section.

a) Would you suggest modification to the content of the short courses? ___ yes ___ no

b) Please indicate whether you found the evaluation system used to be satisfactory or not.

_____
_____
_____

4. The program provides a good balance of theory and practical application. ___ yes ___ no

5. Was your knowledge and expertise sufficiently tapped during this program?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

6. What appealed to you most about this program?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

7. What did you dislike the most about this program? (Please be specific)

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

8. Would you recommend this program to others? Why or Why not?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

9. Did you feel that you were encouraged to participate during class discussions?

_____
_____
_____

10. Overall, was the program effective in meeting your needs. If yes, then how?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

ABOUT YOU

11. What new ideas or techniques are you taking back to your kindergarten or day care centre?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

12. This program made a contribution to increasing my self-confidence and personal development. ___ yes ___ no

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE 3

13. What specific changes have you made in your Centre or Program because of the ideas acquired during the Extension Program?

14. Has your perception of how children learn been affected through this program? Why or Why not?

15. List three important things that you learned about yourself through this program.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION EXTENSION PROGRAM
QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Supervisor or Colleague:

Please answer the following questions to help us to better understand the influence of the Early Childhood Education Program on your employee/colleague.

1. Please list any changes you have noticed in your employee/co-worker in each of the following areas:
   A. Level of confidence:

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

   B. Work with children:

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

   C. Relationship with other workers:

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

   D. Skills displayed at the Centre:

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

Please check off one of the following boxes:

_____ Supervisor/Director _____ Co-worker

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. Please mail back in the enclosed addressed envelope.

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